CHINESE LEARNERS' IDENTITY IN THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION ACCENTS

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Abstract
This research addresses Chinese learners’ identity in their English pronunciation accents attitudes. It is based mainly on the analysis of learner journals and partly interviews and observation of the instructor. The study found the Nativeness Principle in pronunciation pedagogy still predominant among Chinese students. However, some students began to claim for the legitimacy of their Chinese influenced English pronunciation accents. In the different attitudes toward English pronunciation accents, students were found bearing different learner identities and some changes in these identities. It was suggested in this study that pronunciation “good” or “bad” could serve as an educational resource to prepare students for their future identity as legitimate English speakers.

Key words
English pronunciation accents, the nativeness principle, the intelligibility principle

I. Introduction

Language attitude has been a research focus in sociolinguistics for more than half a century. It is linked to views of identity since people’s reaction to language varieties reveals their perceptions of the speakers. Edwards 1985 146. Quite a few studies showed that one language or dialect is evaluated higher than another one in terms of social status and educational level of the speakers. For example, English was rated higher than other languages like French in Montreal. Lambert et al. 1960 Spanish among Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans. Carranza 1 Ryan 1975 and Chinese among college students from Hong Kong Guangdong and Beijing Gao Su Zhou 2000 while Chinese in Gao Su Zhou 2000 study was rated higher than Cantonese a dialect in China.

Attitude studies on pronunciation accents followed a similar route. And it was found that standard accents were most often associated with social status the media power competence and intelligence whereas nonstandard accents were evaluated less favorably along those same dimensions. Fishman 1971 Giles 1970 1971 1973 Gao Su Zhou 2000 Ryan Carranza 1975 Ryan Canrranza Moffie 1977 Ryan Hewstone Giles 1984 Tucker Lambert 1969 Wang Wang 2004 see also Brennan 1 Brennan 1981a b Cargile 1997 Cargile Giles 1998. As language learners’ nonnative speakers of English for example were often derided by native speakers on their pronunciation “errors” as sounding comical incompetent childish etc. Koster Koet 1993 Mawhinney Xu 1997 and they unconsciously conveyed their insecurities and self-doubt in wanting to sound native like even while they acknowledged that their accents carried their identity Rajadurai 2006. Using accents to discriminate has been called the last publicly acceptable form of discrimination Lipp Green 1997. This was reflected strongly in the pronunciation pedagogy. The Nativeness Principle which holds that native-like pronunciation in a foreign language is desirable and achievable was a dominant paradigm in pronunciation teaching before the 1960s. Though an overwhelming amount of evidence on age...
Flege 1988; Komshian & Liu 1999; Intelligence and aptitude for a summary see Segalowitz 1997; etc. was against the principle that still affects greatly pronunciation teaching practices nowadays Sifakis & Sougari 2005. Nevertheless, the Intelligibility Principle gradually gained its momentum for the increasing number of nonnative English speakers that have already outnumbered native speakers. Intelligibility is defined as the overall assessment of how well a speaker can make himself or herself understood. Subtelny, Whitehead & Orlando 1980. This principle recognizes that communication can be remarkably successful when foreign accents are noticeable or even strong Munro & Derwing 1999. It diverted the attention away from the so-called prestigiously standard and unaccented native speaker pronunciation accents RP or GA etc. and theoretically gave the pronunciation accent ownership to the non-native speakers.

This present study was conducted in an Arts university in Beijing. It was to explore Chinese students’ multifaceted identities through presenting their various attitudes toward English pronunciation accents.

2 Methodology

This is a report on a two-year study part of a big longitudinal research project1 on Chinese college students’ English learning motivation and self-identity changes starting from 2005. The whole project involves five universities and it includes various investigating instruments such as questionnaire survey journals Interviews and observations. Our research site is a university that highly stresses the importance of English learning and there is a strong emphasis on English pronunciation and intonation in English teaching and learning.

Journal data were collected in a natural English class for Non-English majors2. Three journal topics were assigned by the English instructor every semester in the past two years from 2005 to 2007. It was not compulsory and the students could simply not hand in their assignments if they did not feel like writing on a certain topic or even all of them. There was no requirement for the length of the writing either and the real length of students’ writings was from 200 words to 1,000 words or so. Generally in the class with 59 students 30-40 students turned in their writings. The instructor read and responded to these writings without grading them. Each journal topic had a broader central theme with several questions as prompts for students to choose from for whatever they were interested.

Questionnaire survey was carried out at the beginning of the first year and the end of each year throughout the first two academic years. Observations were made by the English instructor during class and in casual communications with students after class. Interviews were conducted at the end of each semester among some students by interviewers who were at that time graduate students in another university.

This paper is one of the research reports on our site. It is an exploration of Chinese learners’ identity as related to English pronunciation essentially based on the analysis of the learner journals plus some observations of the instructor and some interviews in which students’ feelings for their own pronunciation accents were mentioned directly.

The journal topic was assigned in October 2006. Assuming that some students were more sensitive to different accents while some still working on their pronunciation we prepared two relevant prompts for them to choose from as can be shown in the following:

a. Is English pronunciation and intonation an important part of your English study why or why not.
What is your standard for good pronunciation and intonation? What specific efforts have you made if any to make improvements in this respect? In what sense does your pronunciation and intonation make you feel confident or not confident as an English learner?

b. Have you noticed different accents of English? Is there any kind of accent that you particularly like or dislike? How do you feel when you hear or produce it? What specific efforts have you made if any to imitate or resist imitating it? Why?

3 Findings and Discussions

43 journals were collected and among them 38 88 were mainly in response to prompt a.
In the eye of the instructor, she was quite active in response to the instructor's requests for student opinions as she wrote in the same journal. Good accent can make a person confident to speak and willing to speak English. She volunteered a lot and seldom hesitated to give her replies if not considering leaving opportunities for other students to practice their English in the big class with nearly 60 students. Good pronunciation that she believed she had encouraged her to become a good English speaker, hence the more confident she was with her pronunciation, the more she liked to speak English and the more she practiced English speaking, the better she could express herself well in English.

Some students were not very satisfied with their pronunciation because they did not consider it near native, though unquestionably acceptable. It might impede them from some English practice but might push them harder to work more diligently in their pronunciation. ZK was one of them. She wrote down her strict condition for good English pronunciation in her journal: pronunciation and intonation should sound native. Not only should you let English speakers know what you are talking about but also make them feel you are just one of them rather than a foreigner. 0530 F. Near native pronunciation to ZK should make native English speakers feel that she was one of them and not a foreigner and this nearly unsurpassable requirement for her, a foreign language learner, blocked her from attending the pronunciation and intonation contest in her first term at the university as she
wrote in an email to her instructor: the only reason that I didn't take part in the competition is that I think my pronunciation is still not like that of a native speaker. Though she lost that chance to practice her bravery to speak English in front of a big audience, she was making her efforts to approach her goal, which she mentioned in the same email: I will work hard to improve it. Her painstaking efforts eventually impressed the whole class and the instructor in the second academic year, she delivered a speech as her last presentation in class full of passion and confidence. To the instructor, her pronunciation was not necessarily improved much, but her belief in that improvement gave her strength, power and force, and that obviously enhanced the effect of her speech delivery.

Some students did not have "good" pronunciation, but still took native pronunciation as their ideal standard. YC was one of them. Though he did not mention his standard directly, it could be sensed in his admiration for some students with standard pronunciation and accents.

Sometimes when my classmates talked, I could hear English spoken fluently with a standard accent. I would mix them. My foreign teacher often asked if they ever lived in foreign countries, and they did. He started a fantasy about living abroad to "make my pronunciation better" because indeed he thought English pronunciation and intonation is very important.

So I wish I could live in the abroad for a period time so I could develop my spoken English and make my pronunciation better. 0502 M J1.

The situation went worse when he was commented by a foreign teacher an English native speaker the "authority" of English pronunciation has having "weak" pronunciation.

I feel that my pronunciation is the biggest problem. In the other hand, everyone knows the fact that I have pronunciation problems with my pronunciation. Last term, when we had oral English exams, the foreign teacher said to me "if your pronunciation is weak." 0502 M J1.

YC became widely notorious for the problem. Soon he nervously found himself surrounded by his roommates and classmates taking the identity of pronunciation "police" pointing out his problems in his pronunciation anytime they heard him. This was reported in both his journals and interviews.

When the fact was spread out widely, I was nervous when I read English in my dorm since they would immediately say "you have pronunciation problems" problems with your pronunciation. That is to say, in most cases, they did not understand my spoken English. 1st interview.

And in dormitory, my roommates often say that they can understand my English because of my voice accent. 0502 M J1.

When I speak English, I am often told that my pronunciation of some words is not correct or standard. This often let me feel frustrated. 0502 M J2.

He wanted to share his bitter experiences with his high school mates from whom he expected unconsciously their company understanding and sympathy and support since they might face some similar embarrassment in different universities or colleges.

For the first time I realized my condition of English learning. So dangerous I can imagine this, when our high school students come for reunion. The first thing I want to tell them is my poor English. 0502 M J1.

YC even expanded his circle to include all people in Hubei province indicating some of his problems were unavoidable.

Well, like we Hubeinese do not distinguish between "n" and "l". And lots of others. Many teachers can hear that. 1st interview.

He also resorted to complaints about little training on pronunciation in the past to relieve him of the responsibility for his weakness in pronunciation.
Chinese Learners’ Identity in Their Attitudes towards English Pronunciation

I know there are some factors that cause my spoken English not to be standard. I didn’t have very formal exercises of English pronunciation and in the past we didn’t think it an important part of English. Neither my English teacher nor I have a beautiful voice. What a nice thing!

YC ended his journal on pronunciation with another fantasy: “Have a standard spoken English and a beautiful voice. What a nice thing!”

Living in between a frustrating reality and a fantasy world, YC did not have much support and encouragement to struggle for his power to claim the ownership of English pronunciation. In the English class he sought comfort in his complaints about some fantasies and students from small places. He was no longer active in discussions, nor was he full of original ideas as at the beginning. To avoid embarrassment, he hardly repeated his utterances or words from time to time in order to seem normal.

These students following the Nativeness Principle in their evaluation of pronunciation were either proud of their native pronunciation or ashamed of their non-native pronunciation. They were some who accepted intelligibility as a basic requirement for their own pronunciation. YTY said in her journal: “As a Chinese, my English also has an accent although I didn’t notice it. I’m OK.” The only thing we have to do in order to reach others’ understanding is to pronounce more clearly. YTY did not find it hard to make her English understood, though she did have a flavor of Beijing local dialect in her English speaking.

Voice for intelligibility

Among those students who took native pronunciation as their standard for good English pronunciation, there were some who accepted intelligibility as a basic requirement for their own pronunciation. YTY said in her journal: “As a Chinese, my English also has an accent although I didn’t notice it. I’m OK.” The only thing we have to do is to practice more so as to pronounce clearly in order to reach others’ understanding.”

YTY did not find it hard to make her English understood though she did have a flavor of Beijing local dialect in her English speaking.

HK had a light taste of Sichuan dialect in his English speaking according to the instructor. But he resorted to multilingualism being a major in other subjects and not English as an empowerment for his English speaking legitimacy.

I’m not an English major. I just want people to understand me. That’s enough.

HK was the only student who was not important at all so long as intelligibility was reached. “Maybe a majority of people consider accent a real problem in pronunciation but I just keep the contrary view. Instead of finding an excuse for my own poor oral English, I never regard accent as a problem in English. What’s English but just a kind of language? What a language is just a kind of tools for communication. So despite your accent, you can make yourself understood by others.” The only thing I can do is to practice more so as to pronounce clearly in order to reach others’ understanding. Does accent matter? In the eye of the instructor, HSK’s English is not poor at all. He has good pronunciation very clearly intelligible as could be heard in very few occasions when he spoke English in class. Indeed he did not bear any native accent. HSK wrote his reason for not considering English accent: Important English is nothing but a tool for communication. And this deprived nativeness in English pronunciation of its status and power as a way to empower him in his English speaking as a foreign language learner.

Anyways, LK, YTY and HSK could afford not to care that much about their pronunciation. As their English pronunciation was not an obstacle in their English communication. But there were a few students whose pronunciation was hardly intelligible to different degrees due to the heavy influences of their local dialects. RY and YB were the two most typical ones.

RY was the only student who did not have her voice for intelligibility heard in her journal but she did begin to cultivate that voice in her fourth interview.
In her journal she put down her standard for “good” pronunciation like this:

In my belief a person who has a good pronunciation and intonation must make others understand what he has said easily and people will feel it a pleasure to listen to his speech.

But she immediately commented on her pronunciation. “But unfortunately my pronunciation is very poor.” The sharp contrast between her “high” standard for pronunciation in general and “poor” quality of her pronunciation in reality deprived her of the right and courage to speak English in front of others. Indeed she was mostly silent in class. When it was her turn to do exercises or presentations in English she appeared shy and hesitant and her voice was rather low in the observation of the instructor.

RYY’s pronunciation was truly not “good”. That the instructor had to admit. When asked to raise her voice a little bit she was indeed found speaking “another language” rather than English. The pronunciation of her most words was either “incorrect” or unclear. And only by finding out some consistent “errors” as the rules in her pronouncing English words could the instructor guess the general meaning of her utterances.

After reading this journal the instructor came to realize that due to some unpleasant experiences in high school she resorted to silence or low voice to avoid the “errors” in her pronunciation being picked out by others for some momentary sense of security.

I didn’t find that my pronunciation was poor until in Grade two in high middle school. One day when I was reading words my classmate sitting beside me picked out the errors in my pronunciation. She told me that the main stress was not on the right position. She almost picked out errors in every word I spoke. I felt very embarrassed. I lost self confidence. From then on I dared not speak English loudly and didn’t want to speak English publicly. I feared that anyone would jump out to pick out my errors in pronunciation. I could get a high mark in English test but I seldom answered questions in English class.

In the four time interviews she impressed the interviewer by her consistent complaining about her own “poor” pronunciation which indicated obviously that she suffered for a long time and continuously from her “poor” pronunciation and unfavorable comments from both her classmates and foreign teacher. Her anxiety and helplessness was betrayed by her complaining about the neglect of her English teacher in the middle school and the negative influence from her local dialect.

Last time in the oral English exam the foreign teacher told me that my pronunciation was too vague and he couldn’t understand some of the words. In fact my pronunciation is not standard because in my middle school the teacher did not teach us how to read those phonetic symbols. I was lack of confidence and I dare not speak English when I was in high school. Even now I dare not open my mouth to speak English. Interviewer: You don’t feel like to speak English? Is it because of your pronunciation? Yes, pronunciation on the one hand and slow reaction on the other. When someone asked me a question in English I was not quick in organizing my English. Interviewer: Have you ever tried to practice your oral English? I dare not. The pronunciation of my pronunciation is too poor. My Chinese I don’t have a standard pronunciation when I spoke Mandarin. In the 1st interview it was the fault of my teacher in middle school who did not teach me phonetic symbols well. In the last oral English exam we were asked to prepare a topic of our own. I told a story about Liangzhu. The teacher said it was good when I finished. I felt very good. But when I went to see my score he told me that my pronunciation was very bad. 2nd interview I have decided to take band 4 oral English exam. The possibility of passing it is slight but I prepare to go back home to start learning phonetic symbols. My sister is an English major and she can help me with it.

Interviewer: Why do you suddenly start to practice phonetic symbols and oral English this term? My oral English is bad due to my poor pronunciation and I seldom practice my oral English in class. I knew my pronunciation was poor but I never imagined that my pronunciation is not standard to such an extent. 3rd interview They said it was ok this time since I slowed down my speed when I gave a presentation and I put down some English words on the blackboard. They said they could understand. This is the only thing that I pursue now. 4th interview
Undeniably her unrealistically "high" standard for pronunciation compared with her own pronunciation and negative comments about her "poor" pronunciation from people around caused her quite a lot of pains and suffering. In her fourth interview she appeared to recover a little bit from her seemingly "everlasting" heartbroken experiences. In a presentation by speaking slowly and writing down some key words on the blackboard she put across her ideas well enough to the class and the instructor. Her classmates comments like "it was ok" and "they could understand" brought some consolation to her. And she began to lower her standard to the intelligibility of her pronunciation. This is the only thing that I pursue now. Optimistically this might be viewed as a starting point for her to grow out of the shadow in the past.

YB had a "better" pronunciation than RYY in terms of intelligibility but he underwent similar painful experiences himself as he wrote in his journal:

Sometimes I appeared to be a little shy especially when a certain person said to me "I'm sorry but I can't catch you" or "could you please say it again". That's quite common in my English class. Actually it's because of my accent. I guess and it's true. 0549 M J213.

His frustration could be sensed in another journal he wrote: Mostly I was too nervous to express myself well. I always thought I couldn't give the right pronunciation for they always seemed a little puzzled about my words. Time after time I'm not as confident as before. 0549 M J312. YB was luckly as he met a foreign teacher who helped release his burden by appreciating his pronunciation. One time an oral English teacher said to me your pronunciation is excellent. I was shocked. I never expected someone would say that to me. Even didn't say thank you to him from then on. 0549 M J312. I tried to speak louder. It works. Really beyond my imagination. 0549 M J312. YB spoke English with a strong flavor of his local dialect. One of my good friends once told me "You must be a foreigner". I guess and it's true. 0549 M J212. But he knew how to make his English understood OK it's hard to change my accent whether it's important or not. I can manage it with slower speaking speed. I try to say the words one by one when it's necessary. 0549 M J312. According to his instructor his pronunciation was not standard but clear slowly but persistently expressing his ideas. It seemed to have confidence and power to make others listen to him when he was speaking English. In his journal he recorded his gratefulness to that teacher for his encouragement. 0549 M J212. How I know my pronunciation is not that good. The English teacher was just cheering me up. He hoped I would be more confident. 0549 M J212. You have to learn to accept the truth that some dreams can come true just as you can make every pronunciation right. Because there's no pronunciation that's forever right. Be confident maybe you're pronunciation is not good maybe your dreams will fade. 0549 M J212. Your life is still exciting. 0549 M J212. With that teacher appreciating encouragement YB did not just gradually accept the truth that he was unlikely to acquire perfect English pronunciation accents but he challenged the authority of pronunciation nativeness. No pronunciation is forever right. He climbed over his anxiety about his nonstandard pronunciation. Though still he felt unhappy when he could not understand other students pronunciation or accents. 0549 M J212. It's still a problem for I don't understand others too. They also have accents. Sometimes it made me feel too bad to go on with the talk." 0549 M J212. But the tolerance he gradually cultivated in himself for his own "problematic" pronunciation accent brought him a broader mind for lots of others by cheering for the "colorful" differences in English accents. Maybe sometimes it's hard for us to communicate with so many accents. But without the colorful accents we lose more". 0549 M J212. From feeling lack of confidence becoming tolerant to his own pronunciation accent YB jumped out of the dilemma of desiring for "perfect" pronunciation but being unable to acquire it. and eventually developed a sympathetic understanding and acceptance of other students. Chinese accented English the process of which characterized his gradual painful yet fruitful growth in his foreign language learner identity development.

Among these students who were following unconsciously the Intelligibility Principle in their judgment of good pronunciation some were resorting to the competence in their major to relieve them of the embarrassment for not having standard though intelligible English pronunciation while some downgrading the importance of the English language and the status of English native accents as empowerment to obtain legitimacy in English speaking. For those whose pronunciation was not intelligible...
enough some eventually turned to a “lower” standard by following the Intelligibility Principle to try erasing the past severe pains in the “poor” pronunciation and some gradually cultivated tolerance for nonstandard pronunciation accents and developed from having inferior complex to challenging the legitimacy of the “authoritative” native pronunciation accents.

4 Conclusion

This paper based on the students’ journals observations of the instructor and some interviews presented different learner identities in their attitudes toward standard pronunciation accents and their own. Generally speaking, there were two distinct voices for pronunciation accents yet colorfully various learner identities.

Facing the Nativeness Principle that is still dominant in the English pronunciation pedagogy, the majority were found observing doggedly this principle as strict followers whether they considered their pronunciation accents’ “good” or not. This is consistent with the empirical findings of Wang [Wang 2004] research on students of eight universities in China. British and American English were rated higher than Chinese accented English. Negative feelings of many students about their “imperfect” pronunciation like lack of confidence echoed the findings in Wang [2004] empirical study that poor perception of their pronunciation would frustrate students.

Some students though quite few of them however holding the Intelligibility Principle started to claim as multi-competent learners for the legitimacy of their own pronunciation accents. This reinforced the findings of some studies in the second language learning context that non-native English speakers recognized that they had other means for example multicompetence. Cook 1992 besides native like pronunciation to establish their speaking legitimacy in their communities. Pavlenko 2003 Golombek & Jorgon 2005 While some still quite few tried to enhance their status as legitimate English speakers by devaluing the English language as only a tool for communication. Others though even fewer began to cultivate an open-minded tolerance toward his and other “imperfect” pronunciation and even question critically the standard of authoritative English pronunciation accents. The only one case in this study RYY started to seek freedom in the English pronunciation by lowering her standard to just reach intelligibility in her pronunciation.

In this report of the two-year longitudinal study changes in students’ identities revealed in their attitudes toward English pronunciation accents were indeed discovered. Some students became more confident with their improvement in their English pronunciation accents in the first two-year college English study. Some became less confident when they were more and more aware of their problems in their pronunciation accents after they came to college though within them there were some who became eventually tolerant to the “poor” pronunciation accents. Some chose to label themselves as multi competent English learners when they entered the college with a major other than English. While others chose to become fighters for the legitimacy of non-standard pronunciation accents before and after they were admitted to this college.

This research has some pedagogical implications for English teaching and learning in China. Good or “bad” nevertheless students pronunciation could be an educational resource to enhance their sense of control over this global language and prepare them for their future identity of being legitimate English speakers at home and abroad.

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Notes
1 The project number is 5BXY007 and the title is The Social Psychology of College Students English Learning A Longitudinal Study in the First Two College Years
2 Nor English majors here refer to students who are not majoring in English
3 The instructor and the researcher were two different identities of the same person but “the instructor” was continuously used in this paper to indicate another distinct identity of the researcher. It is a research limitation.
no matter how hard the two identities were tried to be distinguished
4] There were two semesters in a school year then [the first from September to next January] and the second from February or March to July. Since 2007 a summer semester came into existence in July and August.
5] The author appreciates Ma Xiaoqi, Zhao Chunya and Guan Ting for their efforts in interview data collection.
6] The interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated into English by the researcher.
7] In 0525 M TXZ 0525 indicates the number of the student: M male, F female, and TXZ the initials of the student. This applies for others in the following.
8] In the quoted lines from the students' journals words deleted were the "wrong" usages and those in brackets were the "right" usages corrected by the instructor.
9] For two years in this instructor, English class students were encouraged to use 3 to 5 minutes to give at least one presentation in English in front of class. The presentation could be on any topic.
10] J1 was a summary of English learning at college for the first term of the first year. J2 was written in response to the topic on pronunciation/accents.
11] Parrot here does not have any unfavorable implication.
12] Lian Jinzhu is a widespread love story in the Chinese Tang Dynasty.
13] J2 was written in response to the topic on pronunciation/accents. J3 on the communication with English native speakers.
14] Dong Bei means northeast. It is in the northeastern part of China.

References

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